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SUBJECT: TURKISH MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS: AKP POISED FOR  
VICTORY IN ANATOLIA'S HEARTLAND

(U) Classified by Polcouns John Kunstadter; reasons: E.O.  
12958 1.5 (b,d).

1. Summary: Hampered by unorganized, uninspiring candidates, AKP's chances in the Anatolian provinces of Konya, Aksaray, and Sivas are based more on PM Erdogan's national popularity than any local candidate or particular platform. Except in rare races where opposition is organized and effective, AKP is likely to prevail despite a pronounced inability to rally around anything but their party leader. End summary.

2. (C) Poloff traveled to Konya, Aksaray, and Sivas provinces to discuss with a variety of political and professional groups Anatolian perspectives on the March 28 municipal elections. AKP's "great wind of change" is sweeping up many voters despite consistent themes of uninspiring candidates, overconfidence in Erdogan's brand name, and disconnects with local constituencies. The absence of women on AKP candidate lists does not appear to be hampering the party's course. Nor is AKP's conglomerate condition a barrier to success: as Sivas Bar Association VP Mustafa Coskun noted, "AKP is like a nice restaurant where people gather, sit at separate tables, and have no idea about the topics of conversations going on around them."

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KONYA: ERDOGAN AND ALLAH AGREE, AKP SHOULD WIN  
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3. (C) Even without a coherent party identity, AKP threatens a local election landslide in Konya, one of the cradles of Turkey's religious conservatives, as voters embrace PM Erdogan's "wind of change" theme. "Political tension isn't very high in Konya because there's no serious opposition," notes Tahir Akyurek, a local attorney and AKP's candidate for mayor. "AKP has filled the center of Turkish national and local politics." This widely held perception, echoed by demoralized left-of-center CHP, center-right ANAP, and rightist-nationalist MHP party officials in Konya, has spurred confident AKP candidates to forgo campaign platforms or strategies. "Image is the most important issue in these elections," AKP Chairman Ali Surucu proclaimed. "We're going to win because we're the party of Erdogan."

4. (C) Only Konya's 3rd term SP (Islamist leader Erbakan's Saadet Party) Mayor Mustafa Ozkafa is mounting serious opposition. Mirroring MHP and CHP candidates, Ozkafa has removed any hint of his party affiliation from his campaign rhetoric, billboards and banners. Ozkaya is struggling to personalize the race against AKP's Akyurek, hoping to take Erdogan's invisible hand out of the election. However, according to the Chairmen of Konya's Chamber of Commerce and Small Businessmen's Association, Ozkafa's administration has, at best, erected hurdles to development for the business community. Seizing on business sentiment, many unemployed voters blame Ozkaya for the area's economic woes. Backward looking, Ozkaya is campaigning on his "legacy of public works," which neither voters nor businessmen seem convinced is reason to reelect him. As a result, either Allah or Erdogan (used interchangeably by AKP officials in this historically religious-conservative province), is poised to deliver AKP a resounding victory.

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AKSARAY: AKP CANDIDATE OUT OF TOUCH, POSSIBLY OUT OF LUCK  
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5. (C) As in Konya, unemployment, city infrastructure development, and candidates' integrity are repeated campaign slogans in the agricultural province of Aksaray, but for AKP, don't extend much beyond populist rhetoric. Contacts in Aksaray echoed largely what we heard in Konya -- AKP's national prominence will likely translate to local election victories. However, unique local factors, including a strong

MHP metropolitan mayor, weigh against an AKP landslide. AKP's candidate - Nevzat Palta - moved to Aksaray from his permanent residence in Ankara just 60 days before the election. State-operated Anatolia News Agency's Bureau Chief Nevzat Altinok whispered that AKP party officials only bowed to Nevzat's candidacy after "out-of-touch" AKP parliamentarians threatened to walk out on the party.

16. (C) Sharing a common, colorless theme with Konya's AKP candidate for mayor, Palta has been accused of pirating campaign strategies, promises, and projects from his popular incumbent opponent. Indeed, Mayor Osman Ertugrul has fired back with public statements criticizing Palta for being out of touch with Aksaray: "He's promising voters projects that I've already implemented." Despite these charges, Palta's confidence is brazen: "I would not be exaggerating if I told you my main opposition is myself," he observes, "I don't regard the mayor as a threat." Both Palta and AKP are counting on the 49% of the electorate who voted for AKP in national elections to come back to the polls. On the other hand, Ertugrul, whose well oiled press machine is running in high gear, has done his best to highlight an impressive legacy of development that has placed businesses and voters squarely in his corner.

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SIVAS: TOO CLOSE TO CALL  
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17. (C) Sivas Deputy Governor Celil Ozbey summed the race in Sivas: "If you ask the candidates, each will tell you he'll win by 60%; if you ask someone on the street, he'll tell you all three are tied." As a matter of Anatolian pride, key officials from AKP, Islamist-nationalist BBP, and Islamist SP place special emphasis on capturing local elections in Sivas. AKP is pressing because Deputy PM Abdullatif Sener, who is actively campaigning across the province, is from Sivas. BBP National Chairman Muhsin Yazicioglu and his long-time subordinate Nevzat Yanmaz are personally invested because both are from Sivas. Mayor Osman Secilmis has controlled Sivas for the last 8 years for SP. CHP led Sivas from 1918 to 1984.

18. (C) Largely seen as a friend of Sivas, significant minority (Alevi, Armenian and Bahai) constituency, SP,s Mayor Secilmis is mounting a strong campaign against &AKP,s wind of change.8 According to AKP Provincial Chairman Hakkan Akkas, &Our race is not with SP, it,s against their candidate.8 Secilmis, who lives in a predominantly Alevi district of Sivas, is making a strong showing. Shop owners, taxi drivers and CHP party officials agree: &He,s our neighbor. Every time a child is born, he,s there to kiss it; when someone dies, he,s at the funeral. People appreciate that.8 Conspicuously, despite repeated questioning, AKP party officials avoided discussing any details about their party's candidate, focusing instead on Erdogan,s national appeal.

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ACCEPTANCE OF TRADITION KEEPS AKP'S WOMEN BEHIND THE SCENES  
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19. (C) "AK is a totally new vision that is still being defined," according to AKP Konya Women's Branch Chairman Gokcen Sahar. Unfortunately, as she reluctantly admits, the party's men, who don't see a role for women in politics, are drafting the vision. More readily vocal than many of his AKP party colleagues, Konya Provincial Chairman Ali Surucu articulated AKP's Konya approach: "Women should do what women do best ) raise children. Mothers have to fulfill their primary duty ) being a mother; then they can think about politics. How can you be a good mother and work at the same time?" Indicative of the strength of traditional patterns in Konya, Sahar agreed, "Our women's auxiliary is focusing on teaching women how to be good mothers. Domestic violence and women's health issues are important -- that's why we need to teach mother's about their family responsibilities."

110. (C) AKP women in the region continue readily to embrace this mixture of conservative culture, conservative interpretation of Islam, and domineering male political attitudes. Committed to their back-seat roles as child bearers and carers, AKP women in this region do not yet show that they are ready to compete for political prominence. Forty women in Sivas and another thirty women in Aksaray -- all on the board of directors of AKP Women's Auxiliaries -- fell back on cautious arguments: "We just don't have any women who are interested in running for office."

EDELMAN